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WHAT IS "THE UNCONSCIOUS?"

BY HENRY JONES MULFORD, M. D.

When Freud presented "the Unconscious" to us he uncovered a mystery. That is, he uncovered our ignorance, for, what is mystery but ignorance? He brought home to us the fact that we were in a lamentable state in regard to our understanding of the human mind. We always had looked upon the human mind as a thing marvellously subtle, uncanny and difficult, and Freud but confirmed our belief. The very phrase "the Unconscious" was mysterious in our sight, and we stood aloof and gazed at it with wondering eyes and a doubtful mind. We always had suspected that there was something awful in the human mind, and now we were sure of it!

And why were we sure? Was it not because of the very word "Unconscious"? Mind itself, being a mystery to us, this further word but confirmed that mystery. The two words became associated in our minds, and, with the mystery suggestion in the background, no other result could follow. But, the high priests of the Cult tell us, we committed an error in thus associating these words. While we may say "the Unconscious" we may not say "the unconscious mind." The Unconscious may do this and may do that, *may behave as mind*, but it is not mind. Naturally the situation was confusing; it especially was confusing since others were using at this moment those other mysterious words, "subconscious," "co-conscious," and "subliminal," in association with the word "mind."

It is not at all surprising, then, that we were all at sea over this situation. One would have to have a steady mind in order to keep it steady under the circumstances! How could the machinery of the mind be used as mind and still not manifest mind? The high priests agreed, in forbidding the association of the word "mind" with the word "unconscious," that it could not; and then asserted, in recording their observations, that it could. What could a poor ignoramus do then? What was there left but mystery?

But now, why the mystery? Is not the human mind understandable? Of a truth it is. No matter how varied its phenomena may seem to be, no matter how startling, no matter

how puzzling, it may not be impossible to classify them. All that is needed is an understanding of the machinery through which the phenomena are manifested. And for this machinery we do not have far to seek. Not farther than the human brain, for the human mind is manifested through the human brain; the machinery of the one is the machinery of the other. Any mind phenomena, then, must be referred to the brain if they are to be understood. And, coming to "the Unconscious," that, too, must be referred to the brain, for, whether it does or it does not belong with the mind, *it is observed in the region of the mind*; its phenomena arise through the machinery of the mind. It is, then, to the brain that we must go if we would understand "the Unconscious."

At first glance the human brain does not appear difficult, its machinery being, to the naked eye, a simple arrangement of cells and fibres, fibres that transmit stimuli and cells that receive and respond to the stimuli. But the arrangement is not simple, however it may appear. There is something here beyond the reach of the naked eye. *What is the reaction within the cell?* What is it that enables the cell to respond to stimuli? It is not difficult to understand how the cell receives the stimulus, for that is, after all, in line with its transmission over the fibre, a continuation of the cell: but, how is the cell, having received the stimulus, able to send back a reply?

The nerve fibres have bothered us some, but that was because of their complex distribution. But, having traced these fibres from their cells of origin to their areas of distribution, we now have a fairly clear idea as to them. The main difficulty for our human understanding lies still within the cell itself. Why does the cell react to stimuli? And why is the reply not always the same? Why is the reply sometimes so aimless and so inconsequential? Here is where the mystery begins to appear. There seem to be two levels of activity here, one, free and intelligent, one, restricted and uncertain. And, another point, not only must we consider the reaction within the cell itself, but we must consider also that reaction in its relation to things extraneous to the cell. In their order, then, we have these to consider: The stimulus arising outside of the cell and sent in to it over the nerve fibre; the reaction within the cell itself; the interaction between one cell and another; and the final manifestation of the reaction. There are here three phases, action, reaction, interaction, but of these the reaction phase, because it occurs within the cell itself, is the most important and the least understood. We seek a word that will designate it but what word is there? Does the word

"conscious" fit the situation? Does "unconscious"? If the reaction is conscious then why is its manifestation so often so bizarre, so often apparently without consciousness? If unconscious, then why the so constant evidence of consciousness? The fact is, the reaction within the cell is itself a reaction-complex, and, therefore, beyond the reach of any single word. In order even to approach to an understanding of this reaction it will be necessary to know something of the history of the cerebral cell, to know from what ancestors it came, and its method of development from those ancestors. Cell reactions may be interpreted in terms of cell phylogeny.

The primitive cell contained the primitives of human behavior. It sustained itself through the taking in of food and oxygen; its fluids circulated and it threw off waste; it had offspring; and it reacted to its environment. Today we observe all of these reactions in the primitive amoeba, and, taking this one-celled organism as an example of a primitive cell, we ask ourselves the question; Does this cell know what it is doing? Does it possess consciousness? The answer to that question will follow our understanding of the word "consciousness." If by consciousness is meant intelligent self-direction, the ability of the cell to direct the reaction between itself and its environment, we must deny consciousness to the cell; but, if by consciousness is meant merely the ability of the cell to react to external stimuli, then we must acknowledge that the cell does possess it. The cytoplasm of the primitive cell possessed the ability to react only to touch. The cell could not originate a stimulus, nor could it give intelligent direction to its reply; it could not vary the reaction, it could do only what it was told to do. It could react only to an external stimulus. Its consciousness was, in short, nothing more than reflex consciousness. Reflex consciousness is reaction to contact, without knowledge of the reaction before the contact, or knowledge of it after. The independent cell cannot perceive the reaction approaching, nor can it consider the reaction after it has passed. The cell hasn't the power to consider, it has only the power to respond. The primitive cell constantly was responding to stimuli; environmental stimuli pricked it upon all sides. Its primitive functions were reflex manifestations; it performed them in response to activating stimuli. Contact set the machinery in motion, and the machinery knew how to act when it was told to act. This consciousness, if it may be called that, was not conscious consciousness; it was merely reflex consciousness. It may be said, perhaps, that this reflex consciousness was the beginning of conscious consciousness.

All cells of the animal organism are descendants of the primitive cell, and, as descendants, partake of the nature of their ancestor. All have this reflex consciousness. Even the cerebral cells have it, in the lower animal as well as in the human animal. The primitive cell was an outside cell in all its aspects, it was in direct contact with outside environment upon all sides; and the cerebral cell, having been developed from the ectoderm, is in its origin an outside cell. Before it became a cerebral cell it was an outside cell responding to external stimuli; and, having acquired the habit of reflex response through long ages of exercise of that habit, the habit persisted even though the cell had changed its location and had taken on new functions. The cell, as a cerebral cell, was entering a higher phase, but the attributes of the lower phase still remained a part of it. The reflex still remained its dominant characteristic. And it was impossible to have it otherwise, for the reflex was basic, was inherent in the cell protoplasm. But, while it was basic, the apparatus over which it manifested itself had become more complicated. The cerebral cell was no longer in direct contact with outside environment. It now was only one of a vast number of cells of the same character isolated from the outside world within a circumscribed bony cavity. The cerebral cell had been taken out of the world, as it were, but, even though it was out of it, it was not out of touch with it. The axon which the cell had developed for the purpose kept it in touch with the environment of the individual. But now, while this cell still remained a reflex cell, it was taking on a higher faculty. It now was becoming a cell that could act by itself. It did not need an external stimulus; it could originate the stimulus. The cerebral cell was developing conscious consciousness. We now begin to sense the complication here. The cerebral cell was manifesting two functions over the same apparatus, the one old, inherent, the other new, a product of development.

We see, then, that the cerebral cell has expression in two directions; the one a touch-and-go reaction, a flash, a quick, unconsidered response to an external stimulus; the other a slower reaction, a reaction in which the stimulus is received. *considered*, and a reply returned that will best suit the situation. This cell has memory and initiative, it can think for itself. The primitive cell had memory but it did not have initiative, it could not think. The cerebral cells having developed the power to think consciously, now are able to direct the behavior of the individual without the aid of external stimuli. These cells do not have to be told what to do, *they know what*

to do. But, at the same time, their primitive habit of reflex action often stands in the way of a proper response to stimuli. While the cells are able to express themselves consciously, the expression often follows through the reflex, becoming quick and aimless and without real value to the individual. It is, in the ultimate, nothing more than automatism. This would be automatic thought, not real thought. It manifests itself through the machinery of thought, and is, therefore, thought; but it is not conscious thought, thought in which the subject is considered upon all sides, it is merely one-sided, reflex thought. The cerebral cells, specialized as thought cells, are behaving as contact cells because they were contact cells before they were cerebral cells. The cerebral cells constantly are under the urge of stimuli, constantly are storing up material for thought. This material carelessly acquired, loosely stored up, is ever-ready to respond to stimuli that may later, call it into consciousness. And the response, unless under the direct control of the individual follows the line of least resistance. It may be connected and logical, or it may be disconnected and bizarre.

And so we see in "the Unconscious" merely reflex action. Here we have action, reaction and interaction but it is action, reaction and interaction outside of the consciousness of the individual. He does not control any portion of the process, neither the reception of the stimulus, nor the distribution of the secondary stimuli set in action by it. We must of necessity designate this as reflex action, for how else may it be designated? It is reflex action, reflex consciousness, cellular consciousness. It is not unconscious action for there can be no such thing, no more than there can be subconscious action. Consciousness is always present somewhere, wherever there is action, and wherever there is action and consciousness there is mind. Mind constantly seeks expression. This is the method of the mechanism of the mind, and the manifestation can be nothing else, no matter how bizarre that manifestation may appear. And so we have consciousness even in reflex action, and there the terms "unconscious," and "subconscious" may not apply.

But now there is the brain to be considered, the brain the storehouse of the mind. The mind, active, draws upon this storehouse in order to continue its activity; but the mind cannot use all the material at one time. While portions of the brain are responding to the demands of the mind other portions are quiescent. Some portions are in consciousness, others are not in consciousness, they are nonconscious. The non-

conscious areas await the opportunity to serve the individual. They await his summons, but sometimes they mistake a summons for *his* summons. *They will respond to any summons coming in over the accustomed route.* But this must not surprise us. The cell itself has no means of knowing who sent the summons. Its function is to receive the summons and to reply. If it receives a summons it must reply and it replies, often, through sheer force of habit. The touch-and-go reflex takes the reply out of the control of the individual. The cell receives the stimulus and acts upon it; but the individual may not be conscious of the reaction at the moment. At the end of the reaction he may sense it, but while it is going on, he does not. In this the reaction is entirely reflex. This might be called subconscious, having reference to the individual, but it is not subconscious in that it is action associated with consciousness. The reaction is outside of the individual's immediate recognition, but it is not outside of his mind. The individual is not always aware of the action of his own mind, but, even though he may not be aware of it, *it is his mind that is acting.* His mind is exercising its inherent quality, but it is doing so automatically. The brain cells are functioning as they have functioned through long ages. They are responding to the constant stimuli all about them; they are never at rest. This may be subconscious as to the individual, but it is not subconscious mind, for there can be no such thing as *subconscious* mind. There may be a fractional consciousness¹ a consciousness only partially developed but it still remains consciousness; it is mind seeking expression, however crude the expression. *Mind is Consciousness.* Any cell that responds to a stimulus must be conscious during that response. It could not recognize the nature of the stimulus and return a fitting response, unless it were conscious. But the consciousness is only momentary; it has neither past nor future, only present. It is reflex. After the cell has completed the reaction it has no memory of what it has done; and it does not undertake the reaction with any idea as to the future effect of that reaction. It merely is responding to a stimulus.

It is, then, not so difficult to understand the disorders of mind. There is behind every disorder, in fact, behind every manifestation of mind, the brain, the *nonconscious*. Reflex consciousness and conscious consciousness reacting with the brain give the varied manifestations. Consciousness takes from the nonconscious, the result depending upon whether

¹ "The Development of Consciousness" by the writer in the New York Medical Journal for January 11th and 18th, 1919.

consciousness is reflex or conscious. If it be conscious, well and good; if it be reflex it may be neither well nor good. There may be, too, a combination of the two; the manifestation may be mixed. Reflex consciousness and conscious consciousness using the same machinery often clash and we have then "confusion worse confounded." But through it all there is not to be perceived anything of the nature of the unconscious at work. The unconscious cannot work, cannot act; there is only consciousness in action. The cerebral cell responding to stimuli responds *in consciousness*. How else can it respond?